

Art in America

Larner, Liz: *Speaking Volumes: 19 Interviews*

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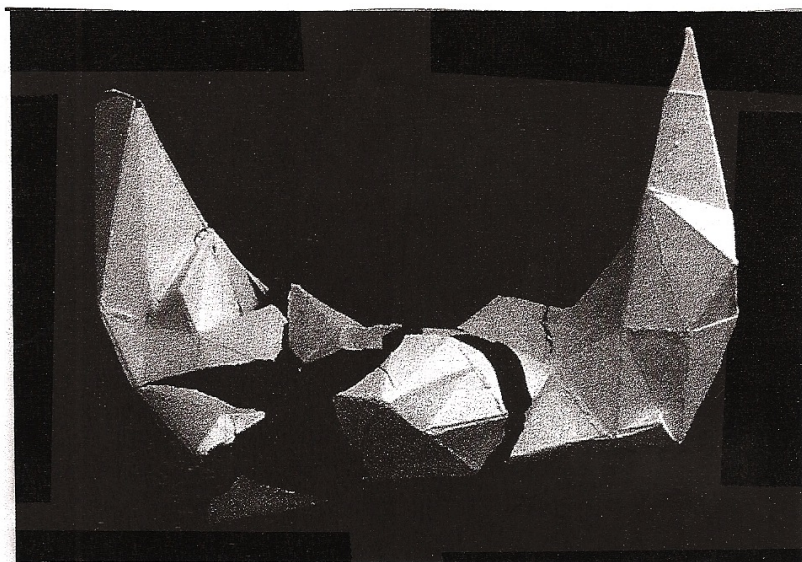
## Speaking Volumes: 19 Interviews

### Liz Larner

I moved to L.A. in 1979 to go to school. At a certain point I decided to switch majors and applied to Cal Arts as an undergraduate. My degree emphasis was photography, but my education got me interested in wanting to work in three dimensions. It was a good time to be at Cal Arts, but also a rocky time. I was there when Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe left, then John Baldessari. Though I got a lot from all the teachers, I wasn't exactly anyone's student. For a brief time I was Jim Casebere's assistant, when he was teaching at Cal Arts. Working for him got me thinking about making things and space—2-D, 3-D and illusion.

After graduating in 1985, I felt if I went to New York I would be overwhelmed with too much information. Ideally, New York seemed like it would be a great place to be an artist, but at that point I wasn't really clear about my direction, and I didn't want to be where all the "best" art was being shown. I wanted to be someplace a little quieter, where I could find my way as an artist. I was leery of a fast-paced market, because I didn't want the pressure to sway decisions I was starting to make. I needed to have more space around me—mental, physical and artistic space. At that time, L.A. was a lot cheaper than New York. Though I would go to New York to see what was going on, I didn't think it was going to be possible to make a living and maintain the kind of sculpture practice I wanted there.

There weren't many galleries here, and the ones



Liz Larner: *Smile, 1996-2005, cast porcelain, 21 by 36 by 19 inches.*  
Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

***"I love the freedom to learn to do this or that and fold it into my practice. It's why I was drawn to art. It's all your fault and your glory." —Liz Larner***

that did exist weren't showing any younger artists. Since it was a small scene, it was very loose, in that everybody accepted what everyone else was doing, even though there were vastly different interests. There was a big punk scene in L.A. Many of my friends from Cal Arts went into music. Though I wasn't a musician I was really interested in that scene. I always thought art is quite performative; sculpture is a very performative medium. Before I started Cal Arts, I remember seeing the Kipper Kids open for PIL at the Olympic Auditorium, which at that time was mostly a Big Time Wrestling venue. I think that combination of artists and space/venue had an effect on my work later.

I don't mind being called a California artist; my work is indebted to my environment, in the sense that it is still really open. I find L.A. an interesting city because it is not at all European. I don't know if it is even American. It's very mixed and always changing.

I think the younger artists today have a whole other thing going on. I teach in the grad department at Art Center, and the majority of the people we graduate stay in L.A. In the last five years it's a totally new landscape of venues and places to show. But there doesn't seem to be as much cross-pollination as there used to be—or perhaps there is and I don't know about it.

My thinking process starts with form and material. The experience of sculpture is multi-sensual. What people sometimes think of as the formal issues of sculpture are important to me, as a way to talk about what we perceive and what we think of as reality, and how that reality is constructed. It's not how big or how small, but what's the right size for the idea.

My practice is based around learning what material I want to employ in a particular sculpture. I do a lot of different things when I need to learn a new technique. I often take classes at community colleges, or I get books and start reading. When I was learning bronze casting I just took a bunch of classes and learned how to do it.

I knew that the "Smiles" needed to be made of porcelain. Then I realized what an investment in time and money it would be. I knew that Ken Price was teaching at USC, and I took a class with him—the first ceramics class I had ever taken. Ken is a California artist whom I have always admired. Last year I bought a kiln to start this porcelain casting that we're finally doing in the studio.

I stuck my toe in the big-production-budget water, but it wasn't for me. The fabricators I've used mostly haven't been art fabricators, but small industrial shops. When I had polyurethane cast, the people I was working with had a hard time understanding why I wanted a consistency in the colors I was using. They couldn't believe that the hardness was critical. The difficulty of getting work done the way I want it means I'd rather do it myself.

Evan Holloway and Jason Meadows both worked for me right out of school, and I knew they weren't going to be around for too long. I have a lot of assistants like that—I know they are only passing through the studio. My current assistant, Tim Jackson, is a painter and a filmmaker. We get along great, and I depend on him a lot.

Your audience as a sculptor is much smaller than that of other artists, because not that many people can get to see your work, since they have to be in the presence of it. I realized, too late, that sculpture is quite a difficult practice in comparison with, say,

photography. Early on, I was showing in New York at a gallery where Gavin Brown once worked, and he was helping me put the show up. It was this crazy piece that had to hang off the ceiling, and it was really hard to put up. And I'd decided that I wanted it to rotate. So we'd been up for two nights in a row trying to finish this thing, and he turned to me with these big goggles on his head and a drill in his hand and he was yelling over the drill: "Liz, I have three words for you, 'oil on canvas!'" Maybe I should have taken his advice, but it's sort of too late now, and I don't regret it.

Now, as a teacher, I strongly support technical education. I've been teaching at Art Center for 14 years, and it took 10 years to even get a shop. I had to put my job on the line to get the students a table saw. We just got a welder a few years ago. Despite having been educated in post-studio, I really feel strongly that students should be offered both—post-studio and technique; I think they shouldn't be separated.

My most important mandate as a teacher is to help students realize what kind of art they want to make. I also ask them to think about why they want to make or do whatever it is. Teaching is something that I had to do for a long time; maybe I don't have to do it now, but I love my colleagues at Art Center, and I really get stimulated there. Sometimes I come home and I can't go to sleep; I'm thinking all night long, and I can't believe that it does that to me still. What's boggling is the exponential number of people that I know because I am a teacher. If I were to quit teaching, it would just be because I really want to learn more or want more anonymity.

I have a very lively intellectual exchange with my community at Art Center. I feel really connected with Pauline Stella Sanchez and Evan and Jason in terms of thinking about what sculpture is, why it's important, and why you would want to spend your life doing something like that. There's a sort of sculptors' camaraderie with Jennifer Pastor, and I've known Mike Kelley for a long time and enjoy teaching with him. Jill Spector and Aaron Curry are two young sculptors that recently graduated from our MFA program and are making interesting sculpture; neither one was originally from L.A., but both decided to stay. Patrick Hill is another young sculptor whose work I like. Meg Cranston and I went to Cal Arts at the same time, and I admire her messy and delightful practice.

A lot of young artists are romantics. Color plays a big role, and a kind of flickering, bourgeois subject matter; and there's a kind of forgetting of history—it's all about now. Though I don't love all the work that is

coming out, I think it's great that so much is happening. A lot of it shows how damned difficult it is to do sculpture well. I'm happy that people want to focus on materials again—that they are not interested only in images or a space beyond our living space.

I always say to people that the only thing you have to do to be an artist is to make art. It is a marathon, it is not a five-year thing. It's great if someone gets a big push out of graduate school, because they are going to need it for the next 50 years. I'm happy that the market is supporting artists at this time, because there really isn't any other support here. I guess I'm pretty selective about the work I love, but I'm supportive of artists; there may be a lot of pandering going on, but I think that is always the case. It just happens in different ways at different times. Perhaps the whole love of pop culture in recent decades wasn't such a good idea. Maybe that bred some kind of thinking that people just want to get by—that they are trying to hold things together, they're not trying to break them apart.

I love the freedom to learn to do this or that and fold it into my practice. It's a big freedom that I want to maintain—it's why I was drawn to art. It's all your fault and all your glory: you have to take responsibility on every level for your thinking and your making and what you produce. As an artist you can change your mind. What's important to me are the decisions artists make through a lifetime. That's the great beauty that I was struck by when I finally started to understand what art is, what the art world is and what artists are doing. A lifetime of decisions and the different places they take people to.